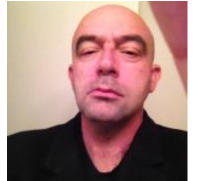
David Lynch’s Alternative Facts, or How Twin Peaks is the Only Response to Trumpian Surrealism

Matthew Wilder



Matthew Wilder wrote Paul Schrader’s *Dog Eat Dog*, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and just played at the Toronto International Film Festival. It opens in November. *Looking Glass*, a script co-written by Wilder, goes into production next month and stars Nicolas Cage, also the star of *Dog Eat Dog*. This fall Wilder will direct his second self-written feature, *Morning Has Broken*, starring Peter Bogdanovich and Lydia Hearst.

David Lynch
Donald Trump
politics
Television
Twin Peaks

Suddenly it appeared: something that seemed to pull together all the horror and pathetic comedy and apocalyptic augury of the moment into a single image.

Perfect, right? It has everything: Trump’s potatoish body, the attempt to jut his chin over his other three chins, the ridiculous look of the underneath-lit eyebrows, the fakely respectful “Hmm” looks of the bystanders, the sinister glow of the orb, and, of course, most of all, the oddly fearful, bomb-going-off look of the Saudi leader at the center.

So far so good, right? And yet: there was something a little innocuously goofy, sort of *Guardians of the Galaxy*-ish about the picture … until some meme-wag turned it into …



… and then it was perfect.

It has for a while now been conceded that Donald Trump's presidency would not put back in business the mocking clowns who flourished under George Bush. Rachel Maddow may be flourishing as she pursues gumshoe-style the Russians under the Lincoln Bedroom mattress, but the faux Jon Stewarts of the mainstream left-wing media have not. The problem is simply that there is no way to apply comic exaggeration to Trump, nor is it particularly effective to thumb one's nose viciously at him. When one watches Alec Baldwin do a yeoman's job of sticking out his lip and waggling his elbows in Drumpfian fashion, it is clear that both we and the *Saturday Night Live* writers and actors know we're not in for the laff riot of the century. They're doing a civic duty: Trump is Trump and he must be mocked, even if that mockery yields no entertainment value for us. No, the only thing to do to reveal Trump's real nation-killing soullessness is merely to invite people to watch and listen to the man himself.

And so it seems weirdly appropriate that the work of an artist who has labored in private, who spent a decade away from his audience building furniture and painting canvases, a man who has never deigned to comment on any landscape outside of his own head, would be the only artist to equal, and perhaps elucidate, *Trumpian surrealism.*

David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: The Return* arrives to us many, many years in the making — so long, in fact, that many of its cast members (most recently Michael Parks) died before the 18 episodes of Season 3 were complete. The show is not responding to any particular contemporary cultural current — the most topical reference in the first five episodes thus shown by Showtime is a gag about the inscrutable quality of cellular phones. What is most striking about it is that most of the "relatable" safeguards that were put into place on the *Twin Peaks* that debuted on ABC in 1990 have been removed. The cutesy-campy coffee-and-pie aspect of the original series has not been elided entirely but surely has been tamped down, as the deal Lynch made with Showtime appears to have been *all or nothing.* No interference, no notes — he delivers the show as he imagines it, just as Steven Soderbergh did with Cinemax and *The Knick*: the series as, in essence, a 10-

hour-plus feature where the director has final cut. This freedom has enabled Lynch to make a work that is every bit as — unconsciously (in every sense) — reflective of the first moments of the Trump era as *Blue Velvet* shoved its speculum into the twilight of the Reagan years.

As with nearly every public action emanating from the Trump White House, *Twin Peaks* 2017 is about a world where the architectural appearances of normalcy still exist but are supported by nothing normal underneath: the lights are on but nobody's home. Or maybe who's home is the dark version of Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan), that adult Boy Scout who now, 25 years later, emerges from the occult veil of the Black Lodge, the above-pictured red-and-black-zigzag room in another dimension, to reappear in our world as two people: 1.) A ferocious, taciturn, long-haired sadist who pops into our universe landing in a seemingly intact life of crime. Also: 2.) Dougie, a Vegas-dwelling square who seemingly holds inside him the "real," but brain-dented, Agent Cooper. Embodying the theme of ever-multiplying identities, Dougie is known to the local, homeless-looking habitués of a low-rent casino as "Mr. Jackpots," because he intones the word "Hello-o-o-o-o-o" to a one-armed bandit, and it spits out coins. None of this makes any difference to "Dougie," however, who wanders through Vegas and a normal guy's middle-class life as uncomprehending as E.T.

Oftentimes an artist who is turning inward captures his moment more acutely than an artist covering the topics of the day. Jackson Pollock's splatters contain the energy and terror of the '50s as much as a Douglas Sirk movie, and Stravinsky's vertiginous clashing sounds describe their moment of genocide and civilizational collapse as vividly as any political novel. So why shouldn't Lynch, with his antennae poised to the world outside, precisely limn our current state — eruptions of emotional and literal violence in previously benign and respectable places, followed by long legato blackouts of blithering incomprehension. As so many Americans are both outraged and paralyzed with bafflement at the day's tweet, outburst, unimaginably cruel executive order, so are the protagonists of 2017 *Peaks* crippled by their inability to process.

In the most emotionally wrenching moment of the current *Peaks* thus far, Lynch himself plays FBI Agent Gordon Cole, who, in the first incarnation of *Peaks*, was a running gag — there's Lynch himself, hard of hearing, barking his words *even louder and flatter than usual!* Now, a poignantly aged Lynch, who has come to resemble the Jimmy Stewart of *The Shootist*, starts to wrap his mind around the toxicity of the version of his buddy, Agent Cooper, who is locked up in a cell. The guy inside looks and talks like Coop, but somehow isn't.

Gripped with fear, Gordon tells his buddy Albert (played by the dearly departed Miguel Ferrer, in a departure from a filmography of sleazeballs), "Allllbert … I hate to admit this,

but I do not understand this situation at all.”

The 1990 *Twin Peaks* played with, sadistically dandled, bent and broke the rules. In this *Peaks*, the rules have left the building. The bad guys are loose and we may not be defended against them — and it isn’t a crooked friend who’ll undo us, but our own faulty eyes, brains, souls. We have seen the Bob, and he is us. As always, a Lynch work at once depicts eternity and this very moment right now; and from the evidence of the episodes so far of *Peaks*, what Lynch sees is an America where the clock is rapidly approaching midnight.

Original image via Saudi 2 Live ⬟